





a plot of earth and other tales

by

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with art by

HEO TSOP



THE DOOMED HOUSE *of* ABRAXAS
Bucharest, MMXXII



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Published for the first time *by*

Mount Abraxas Press,

in Bucharest, January,

MMXXII.

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+ 1957 +

The nebulous cover of the early morning firmament discharged the crescent moon. A crooked azure finger, enormous in its osmosis with the horizon, it taunted momentarily the new-born sun with its frosty rays, before setting behind the concrete urban sprawl, within the distant mountains.

Kneeling at the icon corner of my bedroom, I lit the oil-drenched wick of the small cast-iron lamp. The shadows lurking on the austere face of St Elias were quickly dispersed, escaping into the unsanctioned depths of the plaster shelf, there to plan anew their attack upon the saint. I was reminded of the kalikantzaroi of folklore who keep sawing the world tree all year round, only to be thwarted at the very end by their lust for the Christmas hearth.

I reached into my pocket and reverently pulled out a rattling woolen pouch. I had knitted it last autumn, and then had it hanging from the stove for the twelve long weeks of winter. Now, in the light of the small flame, it had the deep red hue of fierce embers and the profuse smell of wood-smoke.

I emptied the dirty yellowish contents in front of the holy icon; they were an osseous swarm, a mass akin to a bone oracle fit only to foretell misfortune.

I washed the small items carefully, with oiled water that my brother had blessed years ago, removing the traces of earth that were clinging onto them, and dried them with the briary leaves of a small bunch of rosemary. Then, trying to assemble the fragments

into a coherent shape, my thoughts traveled back to the construction site where, one hour ago, I had made the gruesome discovery.

I am the city's most renowned stonemason, a master of my art, well-respected and much sought-out by the officials and the affluent people of our community. In the thirty five years that I have been practicing my craft I have built vertiginous apartment blocks riddled with secrets, umbrous bridges connecting derelict hamlets and absonant, monolithic tombs which still stood empty.

Since last summer I have been working in a large field at the city's southern outskirts. It is a spot I once loved, for it was there that me and my brother used to stop on our way home from school, to hunt hoopoes and thrushes with our slings. The place was a thicket back then, full of huge elms on which we used to climb in search of nests full of diminutive garish eggs.

The trees were gone two years ago, when the city council decided to create a park - a project that was abandoned as suddenly as the trees were felled, leaving a fallow expanse hard to the eyes and to my heart. Last spring, the whole site was bought by the woman that approached me on early June, presenting me with her idea for a grand manor, an estate of light stone and rough wood. It was a bizarre proposition; not because of its scale or complexity, or even the peculiarity of the stairwells' layout, but due to the strange orders that accompanied it: the work on the foundations was to be done only by night, between sunset and dawn. This was unprecedented, and when I first heard it, I laughed - how were we to profess our craft by the light of oil-lamps and feeble electric torches, by the radiance of moon and stars? But the client was adamant - no-one was to set foot in the site under the light of the sun until the foundations were completed.

I obeyed, for the pay was exorbitant and the client was not obfuscating her reasons for this exceptional configuration: she wanted to be sure that no human shadow would be trapped within the house's foundations - she wanted to spare us a slow, wasting death, and herself an ever-lasting haunting.

I had heard this kind of talk before, during my apprenticeship. My master's master had been a brilliant, deeply superstitious man who was always warning about the laying of the foundations: the owner of the first shadow to fall upon the newly dug pit was

doomed to die within a year, his soul forever bound into the stone to keep it firm for ages to come. Bring a stranger or an enemy at the site of a new building, he used to say, as soon as work commences, and let his shadow fall inside the earthen cavity: thus you will ensure a long-lived creation, paying only the price of an insignificant or, even welcome, disappearance.

My master, a person of utter rationality, a genuine child of modernity, had scoffed at his teacher's warnings - in defiance, he was always the first to let his shadow inside the pit of every new construction site; nowadays, 93 years old, he is still boasting about his longevity.

Me, on the other hand, had been entranced by this belief; since childhood I was hungry for any sign of the irrational and the otherworldly, any expression of defiance against the stifling order of the urban and disenchanted world I grew up in, lusting after any way that I could bypass the rules set by man and nature. When I started my own business I used to check on fellow workers, people whose shadows had been intertwined in the foundations of new edifices; years passed and we had yet to mourn an untimely fatality. Half-relieved, half-disappointed, I let the matter fade away, giving it no more thought until my current client's unexpected request.

As work on her project began, I turned out to be glad about the nocturnal arrangements - the diurnal summer onslaught of wave after wave of terrible heat, was more appropriate for sleeping than manual labor. But as October rolled his golden chariot into the city, my team felt the pang of his bitter claws. Thankfully, we needed just two more weeks to complete the digging of the foundations, which would then be covered for winter.

Last night, after the rest of the crew had left for their well-earned rest, I lingered a bit on the site, as was my habit. I circled the dig, examining the night's progress under the beam of my flashlight. I checked the eastern sky, then my watch - dawn was still half an hour away. Noticing a trickle of water in the south part of the pit, I descended and marked it with a large piece of canvas - this was to be dealt with first thing come next sunset.

As I turned to climb the wooden ladder, my gaze was drawn by a glint on the ground. Something sparkled in the light of the torch - it looked like a piece of yellow chalk or a pale pebble,

something that could have been discarded from the pockets of a youth on his way home from school. Filled with sudden nostalgia, I bent down and picked it up to test its weight against my fingers (as I did in my childhood when searching for sling stones), only to drop it in reflexive revulsion when I realized I was holding a small bone.

Taking a deep breath and covering my nose, I knelt and examined the spot - there were a few fragments of bone jutting out of the moist soil, just discernible in the pre-dawn haze. Kneeling, I began carefully plowing the earth with my trowel. More items were unearthed, skeletal remains that were dangerously close to those of human hands. I paused and, still under the influence on my previous fantasy, I tried to imagine the sort of child who could be carrying in his pockets these macabre items - maybe a youth returning from a subterranean nocturnal academy hidden deep below the woods that still defied the advance of the southern part of the city.

I reined in my imagination and ruminated about the repercussions of this discovery. This did not bode any good - a human skeleton meant police investigation, perhaps even the intrusion of archaeologists, promising a delay of -at the very least- several days, if not weeks and months. This would scrap all our current work, since November's storms were legendary for their consistency and ferocity in our area - we would have to start anew come late spring; not to mention the amount of sun-cast shadows that would intrude upon the site by officers, reporters and curious individuals - our client would most certainly decide to drop the project.

Acting quickly, I removed the pieces of the emaciated hands from their earthen tomb and slipped them in the woolen pouch I have been carrying with me since last spring. I covered with moist soil what little was visible of the top of a forearm bone, double-checking that nothing else could be seen, and decided that first thing next night I would order the spot to be covered with a thick layer of earth.

Looking now more carefully at the assembled bones (which almost certainly belonged to two human hands), I realized that there was a joint and a half missing from the ring finger of the left hand - the middle joint was cleanly cut in half as if by a malicious scalpel.

I shivered in the half light of my dawn-touched room, for this observation brought to mind my dear brother, Zlove, which had been missing for twelve winters.

Me and Zlove were inseparable when young, despite him being five years older than me. Even after growing up and moving on to different lives (he studying folklore in the capital and me apprenticing as a mason), we used to visit together the city taverns once in a while, to sate our craving for the local black wine and exchange stories. I used to listen to him with great zest, for he was a well-traveled man that had traversed the Balkans and most of Asia Minor.

When Zlove announced that he had decided to take up the cloth I had not been surprised - for years he kept telling me that the gaze of the folklorist was too detached, too impersonal, enabling him only to study the rural existence he was longing for, not to embrace and live it. The kind of life he craved was incompatible with academia, despite the frequent field forays he undertook under the aegis of the latter; for these excursions were just that: expeditions, intrusions of a stranger upon the tiny communities that held his heart. Although he was not an overtly religious person, he had been drawn to the communal aspects of rural priestly life, to the way he perceived the priest as a central node of the village community.

He undertook his training in the bishopric of our city, in a grim basaltic building with narrow, discordantly ordered windows and gaunt black-dad figures. Having my brother back after so many years, this was a period of delight for me; and, despite its swift passage, its memory still remains a sanctuary for me, an innermost light against the gloaming that followed. And after he was ordained and gone, to take over the parish of a small mountainous province, my work assumed its now-trademark crepuscular hue.

One hot September evening, twelve years ago, I was awaiting Zlove at one of our usual haunts, a low-lit tavern with excellent wine and an all-permeating aroma of oaken boles. I hadn't seen him for two years, since his appointment. When he walked in, wearing the austere secular clothing he always favored, he looked healthier than I had seen him in many a year, if a bit perplexed. After we exchanged pleasantries and emptied our first glasses of wine, I commented on his baffled look; he responded with a story - not

of distant times and craggy places but of that afternoon's homecoming amble.

Returning to the city with the bus, he had felt a sudden craving to walk the places he hadn't seen for so long. He arranged with the driver to have his stuff sent home from the station, and then he disembarked near our erstwhile school, to follow our old route back home.

Upon reaching the field where we used to hunt, the same plot of earth that I am now working in, his eyes were captured by a female form and his gait slowed. The young woman was garbed heavily for the season, in layers of wool and silk, her hair subtly obscured by a red beret, her long-fingered hands ringless. He was enchanted by her countenance, his gaze entrapped by the lines of her face and the shadows of the sun upon the bones of her hands, by the darkness of her eyes.

He continued walking slowly among the trees, his face oblivious to the world around him, maintaining focus on the woman's visage like a moon orbiting its planet. He was suddenly surprised to see the girl (who up to then had taken no notice of him) start shivering almost in tandem with his steps. These were not the soft shivers of a summer breeze which brings a pleasant tinkling to the spine - the woman was shivering violently, almost as if wracked by a seizure, and started looking frantically around, as if searching for a perpetrator. The place being empty of other people, her eyes settled on him, making his face turn sharply down, red with shame and an unreasonable guilt - he felt accused. He quickened his step and risked a backwards glance only when he was out of the field. The woman had stopped watching him - instead she was intent on the place he had been just moments ago - a plot of earth he noticed was of a darker hue.

Zlove couldn't really tell what bothered him about this experience - perhaps it had a hint of eeriness, but it was nothing extraordinary, as he had confessed. Yet the feeling of guilt was lingering on him. I had laughed, hinting to the after-effects of rural life and celibacy, and had then pressured him for exciting stories from the last two years. He was reluctant in the beginning, but as the wine flowed he started speaking of labyrinthine mists and of oracular loom weaving, and of an avalanche that had claimed his silver snuffbox and almost his life. He had gotten as passionate as I remembered, his eyes

glinting with wonder and delight about his new life. After two more pitchers of wine it seemed that he had forgotten all about last afternoon's event; he had even spoken with numinous reverence about a dilapidated sylvan monastery with an absurd painting - I pressed for details but he held back, leaving it for another night. We had left the tavern at midnight and, half-drunk, had said our goodnights and had gone our different ways - me back home and him to our parents'.

This was the last time I saw my brother. He had never arrived at our paternal residence. Police and neighbors had been mobilized for weeks without success. No body had ever been found - none of the two male skeletons that were unearthed some years later in a riverbed close to the city were his. I could tell, for my brother was missing half of his left ring finger since childhood: a midday summer foray to our favorite thicket, a pernicious knife we had pinched from the kitchen cabinet, an accident and an ineffable offering, clandestine looks of secrecy and wonder.

Looking now at the clean-cut finger bone, I had no doubts about the identity of the skeleton. Bewildered, I gathered the bones once more and returned them to the red pouch which I placed next to the holy icons. My soul a battlefield of conflicting emotions, I arranged messages for my workers, giving them the next night off.

As twilight fell I hastened back to the construction site, thinking about Zlove's wishes and beliefs, trying to decide what I would do with the rest of his bones. I would not inform the police; I would not be accomplice to the demystification of his death. My brother would have preferred to remain a blemish in the exhaustive cataloging of our lives and deaths, a vague curio, a blotted passage in the bureaucratic grimoire. I would not bury him in the graveyard, where the living corral the dead, trying to perpetuate the power of conformity posthumously.

In the end I left him there, inside the thicket we both had loved, to remain buried in transgression, a dead seed from which to sprout an edifice of stone and wood, a house of the living. But I did keep the bones of his hands with me, a rattling artifact to carry his spirit around.

+ 1972 +

In the mountainous villages of South Pindus, half-forgotten by empire and history, life still revolves around snow-fed crops, dim-lit pastures, and the weaving of red prayers inside decrepit village churches. The rustic inhabitants of the area, dwelling beneath angular roofs and surrounded by serpents, black mountaintops, and crooked lightning, are imbued with a deep reverence for their land and its manifestations, all the while retaining lore from times immemorial.

It was in one of these hamlets that I found myself as the vicious October days were drawing to a close. I am sixty five years of age now, a retired master - I had been working my craft for half a century; my retirement was long overdue. Having enough money and an enviable pension, I decided to spend my remaining years far from modernity, far from the paranoia and disenchantment of urban life, high up in the mountains, in the parish where my brother had lived for two years.

"Somebody has stepped on your grave," the obese village priest whispered to me after a sudden shiver had run down my spine. We were at the village square, where a festival was held in honor of St Elias, the men waiting for the women to finish the farrowing of the settlement boundaries, an annual practice against the forces of wilderness.

When I confronted the man, asking for elaboration, he lifted his shoulders. "Whenever a shiver runs down your spine, somebody has stepped on your grave," he said - for him this was an axiomatic belief. My mind raced back to my brother's story about the shivering woman of so many years ago. I pressed the clergyman for more, and discovered that there was a story connected to this strange belief, a local tale that he confided after a couple of red wine pitchers:

"A few centuries ago there lived here a young girl named Kolki. She was ten when she first heard the saying about shivering, and she was instantly captivated - for days she kept pestering her family with questions: How could there be a grave for a person still alive? Was it God that allocated each human's lot, or were saints and angels tasked with such trivial matters? And how could she discover the place of her own grave?"

Not long after, a terrible fever fell upon Kolki. For five days she was burning, her body feeling like being cut by lightning and sewn with flame. On the sixth evening of the fever her parents carried the sleeping girl to the village church. They laid their daughter on one of the front pews, covered her with grimy amulets, hopes and prayers, and then departed, leaving the girl to spend the night with God and the saints.

Kolki woke some time after sunset. Realizing she was alone in the cold stone building, misery crawled inside her. She tried to leave but the church doors had been locked; the eyes of the saints attended her with gravity as she moved around in the candlelight.

Slowly walking among the solemn fir pews, she discovered that her only companions were the remains of a male saint: two skeletal hands inside a silver box with a small window of smoky glass, stained by the kisses of the faithful. According to legend they had never been buried with the rest of the saint's body, absconding the soil's embrace. When Kolki approached the reliquary with a yellow candle in hand and turned her febrile eye upon the glass, she saw the hands; they reminded her of the back scratchers her grandparents had been buried with – wooden utensils which resembled half-bent left hands.

It was after midnight when Kolki, still trembling with fever and nocturnal terror, looked out of the narrow church window. She saw a host of candle-flames circling a plot of earth beyond the furthest tombs, where the dead were still sparse and the earth bode its time – the girl realized that she was gazing at her grave. She turned her eyes away and black despair threatened to consume her. But in a sudden flash of lightning she saw the reliquary of sacred bones and hope kindled inside her. Murmuring prayers of forgiveness, she fell with long dirty nails upon the silver box and salvaged the skeletal hands, wrapping them in a bright red church cloth. Beneath them, at the bottom of the reliquary, there was a rusted key, its bow the same size as her eye.

She approached one of the side doors and unlocked the dark keyhole. Once outside, she slowly walked towards the spectral lights, towards her grave-to-be, with a ritual decanter under one arm and the emaciated hands beneath the other. As black clouds rolled above her, she dug a small hole in the moist earth and buried the hands in her place. She spilled red wine over the covered earth, hoping that the hungry ground would be satisfied with the sacred remains.

Next day, the village chanted triumphantly at the miraculous recovery of Kolki. And in the days that followed, when word got out

that the relics had disappeared, people flocked to her window, cutting and burning their grain at her threshold, pleading to be touched by her hands – they thought her touched by the divine, that the hands of the saint had merged with hers.

But as the years passed, clouds descended upon the village; people became acrimonious and started looking at Kolki with bitterness. For it seemed that, not only death, but time itself had forsaken the girl – she had not aged a day after that night in the church. Even her family's eyes became resentful, envious. As the vapours of malice started settling thickly upon the village houses, hooked by the angled roofs, she ran away.

She roamed the Balkans, basking in the sweeping heat of history unfolding. Many years passed without death's phantom touching her; and when it finally did, making her spine tremble, it was a time of war, when dead bodies were aplenty. She found her new grave-to-be in the back yard of a makeshift hospital, among the shallow graves of soldiers – an executioner squad had walked over it not many hours ago. The following night she buried in her plot the body of an old man, whom famine had claimed and no hands had deigned to comfort.

From then on it is said that the shivers return persistently to her, every half century, like glacially rising fingers. Each time, Kolki has to propitiate them with a body untouched by the soil, placing it in her newly assigned lot. Occasionally she is forced to slay, for fresh bodies are not always easy to find. Time made her cruel – she prefers to fill her graves with the ones that have walked on them; young widows and limping children, devout priests and aristocrats, they are all absorbed into the folds of her death – a clog of bones and teeth stretched beneath the surface, an entity gnawing patiently upon the crust of the earth to turn up new graves.”

That's what the priest told me that night, his story raising a tumultuous rattling of bones in my spirit. I bade him goodnight and trekked hastily to the empty, unlocked church of St Elias, which was lit only by fickle candlelight. Locating the empty relic case, I opened it silently and placed inside the bones that I had been carrying with me for the past fifteen years. Then I laid on a pew and slept, dreaming of a freshly-dug, unnamed plot of earth beneath the huge elm trees of my childhood.

hoffnungstod

1560 AD, A PRISON IN EUROPE:

The bell tolled the first hour after midnight. For the past two days rain was falling ceaselessly upon the city. Through the skylight of the prison cell, the water kept trickling into his solemn quarters, the steady sound of falling droplets echoing the rumble of a funeral procession. In his mind, their constant march signified a reverse Jacob's ladder, through which his pleas for life were cast unanswered from the heavens. He had turned his hopes to the supreme Power - the belief in His existence had nurtured him since birth, and he considered himself a devout man through three decades of life. But now, in his hour of need, He had rejected him.

Last night, the visiting priest with the scarred hand had promised him that, if his innocence were true as he proclaimed, it would shine like unvarnished gold before the grand Judge of life and death, and would endow him with a seat beside his creator, a place from which to praise the Lord for all eternity. It was an eternity which felt infinitely remote and distant, despite the distance separating him from it being devoured with every bell chime. He lusted to keep breathing through his broken nose, to keep touching with his scalded hands, to keep his tattered mind thinking, for many years to come. His body had paid a heavy toll to the inquisitors' instruments. But, nonetheless, it was his body, his actual self; shuddering chills coursed through him in the thought that it - he - would be dead in a few hours.

His stomach convulsed again and he fell down on his knees, trying, unsuccessfully, to discharge whatever of its contents still remained, to raise a votive offering of hate upon the stone floor

tiles. His coarse throat and contused gullet opposed the thick bile, retaining it inside him. Rejection was everywhere. He felt as if a precocious noose constricted him, as if a piece of phantasmal rope, insatiable in its cruel gluttony, was eagerly waiting to snap his doomed neck. He couldn't breathe; in vain did his hands try to deal with the nonexistent knot.

He tried to lift himself prone, only to fall down again as his bare feet slipped on a newly formed pool of urine. He tried to crawl on hands that had been irreversibly deformed by the fiery blades of inquisition. He spat on the floor; his outer vision darkened, letting his mind's eye be filled with the phantom of the gallows. He opened his eyes sharply and screamed in bitterness. Tears ran down his filthy cheeks, the knot in his stomach tightened. He didn't want to die. He hurled himself at the staunch iron door, and tried to bite it with the fragments of his teeth. The pain was unbearable; but not even a sliver of redemptive unconsciousness smiled upon him.

The bell tolled the fifth hour after midnight. He heard the austere, heavy steps of the gaolers approaching the inviolable door. He started clobbering the stone floor, fracturing one of his wrists. The gate was unlocked and opened. The light of a torch blinded him, the smell of burning fat all-pervading. Strong arms lifted him, iron grips that clasped his body like black vises. They dragged him out of the cell, out of the tower dungeons, as the cloudless morning sky flared red in the east. The procession marched onwards, his surroundings a blur of images. He had sealed himself, barricading every route of communication with the world, ruminating on the feelings of despair and his approaching end.

The next thing he perceived were the judge's final words: "...sentenced to death by hanging. May God have mercy on your soul." He looked around and saw that he was standing beneath the wooden gallows. The audience of his upcoming death consisted of a dozen curious bystanders, a few drowsy trumps, the judge, the trio of guards that had carried him. In the opposite corner of the square there stood a musician, a flutist. A lugubrious entourage to cheer the end of his existence.

Hearing a heavy breath behind him, he turned his head. There was the last actor of the shadow play that had been his life. Black-hooded head, gray-washed eyes, pulpy arms spotted with age. As

the executioner's hands slipped the noose over his head, he saw that one of them was scarred. He was not surprised to discover that the executioner was the priest from last night. Bitter thoughts about forgiveness and selfless love slithered inside his mind, but they were all abruptly dispersed as the knot tightened about his neck. The trapdoor opened beneath him and the ruthless knot snapped his nape. There was just enough time to empty his lungs with an acrimonious, desperate cry.

The musician brought the flute to his lips. Instead of blowing a melody, he inhaled through the tube, absorbing the last cry of the condemned man. He wove it into a melody inside his lungs, and then, exhaling, he trapped it in his instrument. Then he placed the flute in his belt, turned around, and continued down the road.

1349 AD, A NUREMBERG STREET:

The last corpse-carrier of the day had just moved beyond her hut, his cart none the heavier. She was relieved - she would keep company to her three children for one more night. Their groans pierced her body like rusty arrowheads, rattled it and nailed it to the wooden boards of the humble abode. Still, those cries were preferable to the endless silence, to the eternal muting of the voices of her offspring.

She removed the dry cloth from the forehead of her youngest son, and immersed it in a bucket of cold water that she had drawn from the nearby well. Cold and moist again, she retied it around his head. Then she clumsily drew the Freyja rune in the air, muttering a three-versed prayer to her ancestral goddess. The whispered tone was due to exhaustion - the fear of discovery was irrelevant now. She was past that threshold, not bothered by accusations of heathen worship. This god that she was forced to praise throughout her life had probably sent the plague among them; at the very least he had left it unchecked to reap their lives. She had stopped praying to him two weeks past, when the disease had claimed her husband, and she had turned to the gods of her forefathers, with only a vague knowledge of their worship, and no idea of how to communicate with them. It was a last hopeless cry for salvation, beckoning Freyja to dispel the specter of the plague.

The moan of her youngest son disrupted her fruitless prayer, and she hastened to his side. Since yesterday his flesh had started blackening, his skin bruising. His hands and feet already dark, now exuded a putrid stench. She knew what she would face come morning. Oh, how the invisible, the all-invincible rider would slowly drain the breath of her child, till the only thing left would be a half-rotten husk, prey to the gravediggers. It would be piled upon a cart, then carried like a log to the great pyre, the huge bonfire that burned incessantly for weeks, feeding on the flesh of the deceased. The pyre had already consumed her husband and her parents; it would gorge on her children, on her, on the town, on the whole world.

After two nights only the elder son remained. The disease was already blackening him. Her pleas to the ancient gods had not been answered. Her own body had started rotting and she felt a terrible weakness consuming her. At sunset she had fallen strengthless next to her child, incapable of moving, unable to touch him. Not even a yard separated them, but it was like a cavernous fissure had appeared between them, a chasm that would divide them even beyond death. Woe to the pitiless gods, old and new, that had denied her the mercy of dying embraced with her offspring. She cursed them silently, for her mouth was parched, her tongue blackened and blistered like the bark of a tainted tree. She cursed Hope itself, that remorseless mistress that had stayed her hand from taking her own life while she was still able to do so. Then she passed away.

Since night had fallen, a filthy charlatan had settled outside her window. As the woman uttered her last curse, he raised the flute to his lips, assimilating the inaudible malediction. He wove it inside him, then encased it in his bone instrument. It matched the curses already collected, but his assortment was far from complete. He replaced the flute in his belt, and set off into the night, silent as a shade.

1180 BC, THE MYCENAEAN PALACE:

She gazed on her reflection in the silver mirror that graced the north wall of her apartments. Even after ten years of hardships,

her figure was exquisite, a genuine princess of Ilium. If her mindset was anything like her brother's, she would revel at the thought of her royal line. But no Hector was she. No beloved Hector, now forever lost in the cold halls of Hades, traduced by his killer. She was Cassandra, the accursed oracle, damned by a capricious god; a god luminous for all humanity but her, for in Cassandra he had bred darkness impenetrable.

The mirror turned blurry, murky. She acknowledged the signs of the impending vision. In a rare moment of defiance, she lashed out with the copper cup she was holding, trying, with desperate force, to destroy the polished metal. The trivial scratch she achieved on the mirror's surface started oozing blood; the viscous liquid quickly spread all over the surface, leaving unstained only a vague area in the middle. It was there that an image of the palace baths appeared, the place where the conqueror of Troy had been raping her for the past three nights.

The scene in the mirror pulsed, as if a dark curtain passed through its surface. She now saw the hated king approaching, taking her by violence, leaving bloody marks on her body. She watched Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's puppet, rushing fully armed upon them, flanked by his personal guard. She watched as he stabbed them passionately, as he ravaged and scattered the flesh of Agamemnon, as he copulated with her own naked, dead body.

She had no hope that this was a deceptive, false vision. Every time she had dared to think so, the tragic confirmation of her oracular powers had come rushing, ripping apart her few vestiges of hope. She let her mind settle on a fatalistic void, and awaited passively the end of her damned, short life. She, Cassandra, princess of Troy, daughter of Priam and Hecuba, lover of Apollo, the god who had cursed her, would be quenched; she would descend to the mournful halls of Persephone, there to be one of the countless shades that wail endlessly for what they have lost, awaiting the living to join their ranks.

The musician beheld the blustering slaughter from the bath window. He was waiting for no voice, scream, or curse to trap within the ancient instrument of his. He had already claimed Cassandra's outcries long ago, back in Troy, when god-begotten Achilles hauled Hector's body around the city walls. No, this time he had a melody

for her, a meaningless, hopeless tune, as tortured as her life. He played the flute awhile, then returned it in his belt and disappeared.

... SOMEWHERE IN TIME:

For millennia he had gathered them, moans from the whole world, screams of death, misery, pain, howlings of raw despair. He was seeking them methodically through time and space. He was not fastidious; any sound would do, as long as it was in total negativity with his flute's inmost core, as long as it achieved an infinitesimal fracture upon what was hidden in the deepest burrows of the bone tube. The screams were innumerable, so many that the instrument had almost been gnawed from the inside. One more was required, and then his work would be complete. Then he could rest.

To the East he marched, and climbed on the greatest mountain range. At the top of the world he perched, as night fell. There, beneath the clear shimmering stars, he grasped the flute in his weary hands, sensing the tortured pulse of the voices, the melody of the damned. He raised it to his lips and uttered his last incantation, words that he had woven since the dawn of Time. They left him, gone to meet their comrades inside the bony maze.

He performed the End melody. He of many names, Pandora being his last, he suffused humanity with the discordant veil of hopelessness.

...And humanity listened and understood.

...And darkened were their eyes, the stars forever hidden from their sight.

...And cracked were their ears, and music they heard no more.

...And sealed were their nostrils, never again to smell the withered flowers.

...And cut were their tongues, as all nourishment turned to ash.

...And fallen were their extremities, and they did slither like snakes.

...And broken into pieces were their souls, broken like Hope that they themselves had murdered.

gula

THE AGRAFA MOUNTAINS

Kufjam urged the heavily laden mule onward. As always, the animal was reluctant to cross the narrow bridge. It was as if it could sense something within the old mossy stones that spanned the rushing river. Perhaps the human life that had been forced within the foundations at the beginning of the bridge's construction, was still reaching out to animals and people of a fey disposition. After all, his own father had not set foot on this bridge for more than half a century, not since a nocturnal crossing when a spectral cacophony had chased him all the way to the nearby hamlet of Vlesto.

The bridge was a thing of great craftsmanship, a grand arc of arm-shaped stones, masterfully weaved. Whenever he was traveling the other way, leaving his birthplace behind, the bridge held the promise of new vistas and sights, of the road that spanned three successive mountaintops, before reaching the town of Mouzaki, the closest hub of civilization, the place from where Kufjam was now returning. Now, it marked the imminent end of Kufjam's trek - after the crossing, it was just one more hour of steep climb until he reached his home.

Before the war, he used to make the journey three times a year - early spring, mid summer, and late autumn -, to sell bundles of the scarlet-dyed cloth his village was famous for, and to buy seasonal supplies: olive oil, salt and pepper, the odd metal tool. During winter the mountain passes were snow-locked, the road effectively impassable. He had only braved it once under such hibernal conditions, though it had been no decision of his. It was a February, two years ago, after the end of the war. Kufjam had been carried

home, half-dead from starvation, on the back of a mule, his weight negligible after the months he had stayed imprisoned in a cell deep within the mountains of northwestern Greece.

Kufjam was the eldest of his brothers - doomed to remain in the village, as master and slave of the family land, while his younger siblings were off for studies and prestigious jobs in the great cities of the north. He had felt cheated, his primogeniture nothing but a curse imposed upon him by the ancestral ghosts that regulated, generation after generation, the lives of the village families. He had hated the land, tainted as it was with blood, witchcraft, and terrible saints. There were horrible tales weaved upon each path, each field, each edifice, stories that had been imposed upon his youthful self by his family. He remembered long winter nights, his grandmother and aunt working the looms next to the fireplace, speaking of how the dead were marching through the village, stopping outside each house to look through the keyhole. When war had broken out, Kufjam had welcomed it as a ticket to new places and experiences, far from the land he loathed.

Two years of military action and some months of imprisonment had changed his mind. When he had reached home, Kufjam was a skeletal thing, terrible to gaze upon, an image of death come into hearth. His aunt had kept all windows and mirrors covered, so that the fleeting soul of her nephew would not find a passage to fly away. His grandmother had muttered prayers to her horrendous saints, to the pale moon, her whispered voice half-pleading, half-commanding. Slowly, he had been nursed back to health, to physical well-being, though the specter of war still nested in his eyes.

After his recovery, Kufjam began seeing the land around the village with different eyes, as if his tribulation had painted the mountainside with fresh pigments. He started walking leisurely the innumerable little paths that crossed the fields, he basked in the shadow of fir-covered crags dotted with eagle eyries, savoring the precipitous landscape. He had grown fond of the mist, the breath of the mountains that descended upon the stone buildings, obscuring sight and hearing, blending the line between life and death. The stories of his childhood still haunted the land, but their murmuring had receded, respecting his ordeal.

The journeys to Mouzaki had lost the luster they once held for his younger, pre-war self. He was now reluctant, a creature hesitant to abandon its cradle. It had taken him two years to dare the trip, and now, after five days of absence, he was anxious to reach his hearth, to roam once again the places of his ancestors, to continue weaving his existence firmly into the stony fabric of his haunts.

His trip had been blessed with clear, if frosty, weather, raising his hopes for an early return. But, as he crossed the bridge, briskly treading before the obstinate mule, dark clouds rolled furiously from the northwest, from the bald mountains of Epirus, the place of his wartime imprisonment. He urged the animal on the ascending path, quickening his own stride.

So close to the river, the narrow road -more of a forest path than anything else- winded snake-like through hazel trees, which gradually gave way to kermes oaks and firs as the traveler gained in altitude - it was said to had been carved ages ago by a gigantic finger that had reached from the heavens to guide the steps of his ancestors when they first crossed the river. Five days ago, when he had passed on his way to Mouzaki, Kufjam had noticed that the heavy winter had not been kind to the road. Now its condition was even worse - the path, choked with broken branches and blackberry bushes, was more suited to the passage of roe deer and boars. There must have been heavy storms during the five days of his absence, watery siblings of the one that was now fast approaching.

He made good progress for a while, his steps easily contesting with the slow drizzle. But as he reached a large clearing, the location of a long abandoned settlement whose inhabitants had disappeared before his time (he resolutely suppressed some half-remembered memories about a pestilence that had risen, fog-like, from a crack in the earth), the seething storm caught up with him. It was a vicious downpour, accompanied by a ravenous northern wind which forced its way through the openings of his goat-hair cape, burning his skin with frost.

Kufjam looked around for any sign of shelter. The crumbling walls offered no cover. He backtracked, guiding the mule under the light cover of trees, and started retreating downhill, half-blind by the rain. The trail was lost amidst newly-born streams, as dangerous as river currents.

Drenched, tediously fighting his way through prickly boughs, he glimpsed the silhouette of an edifice on his left. The tall stone building stood in a furze-filled opening, the far side of which could not be seen through the hazy curtain of rain. As he approached, he saw that there were more structures rising behind the first one, all of them in seemingly intact condition. He made a dash for the nearest entrance, mule harness in hand.

He found himself in an arcade leading to an oval yard surrounded by the silhouettes of tall, windowless walls. Cold hard stone was ever-present - the place felt not built, but carved out of rock. This was no mere forsaken settlement. The abundance of corridors interspersed with eerie holy icons, the intact stone facades with the narrow, window-slits, the rusted bells and the enclosures with the dry cisterns that were revealed to him as he wandered, bespoke of a religious communal complex - most probably an abandoned monastery, of which, however, he had heard nothing in his thirty years of age.

The sky darkened as he reached the entrance of what he took to be the temple of the cenobium. A small graveyard lay adjacent to the left side of the building. Rough, cross-less tombstones spread outwards up to the far edge of the clearing, where a patch of ash trees marked the reinstatement of the forest. He tied the mule at the spire of a cistern that lay beneath a sturdy-looking balcony, and entered the temple, removing his cap with reverence.

The hall was devoid of religious icons, of stalls and prayer books, of priests and the devoted. Apart from subtle signs of past Christian worship, like the Resurrection cross that had been burnt on the rock above the threshold, and a broken, dusty reliquary (empty as he realized by looking through the smoky glass), the only part reminiscent of a church's interior was the wooden panel separating the nave from the sanctuary, the iconostasis.

Nature had claimed the space - there were bushes of blackberries growing through cracks in the stone tiles, veins of diseased ivy emerging through broken animal skulls to climb the walls, seeking the light of the narrow windows up high. The iconostasis was covered in moss, fungal growths, and a kind of vine Kufjam didn't recognize.

It was the first time he saw such a naked, deserted church - its desolation rippled through his soul. It was as if the temple, the

building itself, had fasted until the brink of death, removing almost all signs of previous use, all past spiritual fat, until only a husk remained - an empty shell which nature could start fill with its own pigments and utensils. Indeed, as minutes passed, Kufjam realized that the place still felt sanctified, albeit in a raw, primeval manner. The vegetal smell, the odor of animal droppings, a few yellow bones - these formed the incense of a forest temple, where death and life were locked in a perpetual wheel of gluttony.

From the open window he spied the faded stones of the adjacent graveyard - he wondered if they had also been evacuated, the bones carried deep within the earth, the holes empty once more, ready to receive new offerings.

A loud thunder interrupted his musings. Turning his attention to the iconostasis, he approached it with circumspect steps, careful to avoid the thorny blackberry bushes. He lit his lantern using flint and pyrite and examined the wooden surface. There were no religious icons, no crosses engraved, no remains of vigil lamps; still, there seemed to be something beneath the vine that covered the Royal Gate, the central of the three doorways leading to the sanctuary. He carefully cleared the plant with knife and hand; what was unveiled made him take a sudden step back, bewildered.

It was a folio-sized portrait of a dead man painted directly on the wood of the Gate, framed in plain, unadorned silver. The picture background was an emptiness of nondescript, yellow pastels, akin to that of religious icons. The face depicted was haggard, emaciated, a thing of gray skin and bones twisted by deprivation. The eyes were closed, the taut eyelids evoking pain and anguish, a surrender to the slow, inevitable march of hunger. It was a face devoid of nourishment, the image of despair, or holiness, if one thinks of starvation as a path to sanctification. It was a face he knew, a face that haunted his dreams for the past two years, the face of the man he had been imprisoned with.

His mind flew back to the mountain outpost where he had spent the months of his captivity. The man he had shared his cell with was a stranger, probably close to his age. They spoke the same language but had exchanged no stories from their past, not even names.

"I have no desire to burden you with my life," the man had said when Kufjam tried to make conversation, "to taint your spirit with my memories and the phantoms of loved ones that long for

my return. I have no desire to deposit such a weight upon your flesh. Trust me, if death claims you, you don't want to be burdened with my own deeds, name, and remembrances. God knows, they are heavy enough."

Kufjam had respected the man's strange wish, and had in turn revealed nothing to him about his own life. In the end, he had survived, while the other man had succumbed to hunger.

Regarding now once again the macabre countenance of his companion, he was filled with a religious terror blunted by heavy remorse, and an almost ecstatic sense of sanctity. He touched the painted surface reverently. He thought it proper to make an offering to the icon, to the man with which he had spent that most traumatic part of his life. He removed from his pack a loaf of unleavened bread, the last of his provisions, and placed it on a small patch of earth on the floor in front of the Royal Gate, where a stone tile was missing, claimed by hand or nature. He knelt, his eyes entranced by the macabre face. He felt like whispering a few words, but knew of no prayer fit for this occasion, or proper for this temple. Thinking back on the past few hours, he settled on a story of this land of his. He would divulge one of the tales that haunted him since early childhood, one of the terrors his grandmother had unveiled in whispered tunes next to the fireplace. Slowly, hesitant in the beginning, his words gained momentum as the old narration flowed through him. He spoke of the construction of a bridge, of a woman imprisoned in its foundations, buried alive to let the ford stand for centuries, according to a saint's decree.

It was a simple offering, bread and words for a dead man who, as far as Kufjam was concerned, was devoid of memories and life, a husk as empty as this church he stood in. He felt he owed him this and something more. Indeed, as he stood in contemplation, he decided that he would reinstate this abandoned temple in the memory and honor of the other prisoner - he would create a private sanctuary for his fallen comrade.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The light was quickly dissipating, the sun already hidden behind the surrounding mountain peaks. Charting an uphill course, Kufjam was careful to mark down the path he followed with subtle signs on trees, rocks, and forest floor.

It was a full week before Kufjam found time to visit the temple once more. Spring was the busiest time of the year - animals were giving birth, the land had to be tilled; up in the plateau pastures, shepherd huts had to be examined, the winter damage assessed and repaired before the herdsmen returned from the lowlands where they were overwintering.

The whole village took a respite on the 25th of March, the Annunciation day, which was celebrated with panegyric celebrations. After the morning liturgy, people headed to the village square where benches had already been set and roasting fires had been kindled. Clarinet and violin picked up jubilant melodies, while children started climbing in trees, rooftops, and smoking chimneys.

Kufjam loved the festival, the dances that were soon to start - he longed for them as he did every year; in their spirals, he felt as part of something greater, contributing to the mediation between community and land for wealthy bounty. However, this year he would abstain from the festivities, for he well remembered how languid he used to feel after the celebratory excess. He knew that come afternoon most of the villagers would retire for a nap which was bound to turn into a long-winded slumber til next morning. The indolence would spread into the animals and seep into the land until all was silent and still.

He needed his wits, his energy. Claiming malaise, he went back home. The people knew that he hadn't recovered his disposition since the war, and no reproaching words were uttered. He picked up his old rifle, along with some food and three candles he had filched from the church, and then set off through the yews at the south end of the settlement, his trail invisible from the village square.

He followed the steep path until the houses were lost from sight. Then he turned left and made a slow descent, traversing a southeast ravine, an old hunting haunt of his. Following the marks he had left, he continued downhill, towards the temple complex where the portrait was waiting.

The monastery looked uncanny in the clarity of the bright morning - he was reminded of rigid clothes, filled with bones, left too

long under the summer sun. As he circled the clearing he realized that the complex was larger than he had assumed; he counted at least fourteen buildings, all engulfed by a low granite wall. The amount of rock that had been used was extraordinary, but did not surprise him. Stone was intertwined with life here, since times immemorial; people build their houses with it, removed it from their fields each year, used it to grind corn and wheat, and to cover their graves.

His attention was drawn by a sudden movement at the left corner of the low wall. It was a large hare, one that scorned the nocturnal habits of its species. Noiselessly, Kufjam removed the rifle from his shoulder, loaded, and took aim. The hare was lethargic, as if already affected by the celebratory indolence, despite the distance from the village. Kufjam hesitated, the shooting posture still tainted by memories of the war. The hare moved slothfully, approaching a bunch of unripe oregano. Kufjam pressed the trigger, his need for a fresh offering dispersing a hint of regret; the smell of gunpowder was all consuming, the clack of the gun all-pervading. The hare lay still, a hole showing on his left rib-section. Kufjam gathered the still-warm carcass and headed into the complex.

The smell of rot was heavy in the temple. He approached the icon and inspected his past offering. The bread had turned green; mold had spread, covered it, giving it the semblance of a moss-covered rock - another bone of the earth. He took the loaf outside and discarded it near the gravestones.

He removed two candles from his sack, and placed them on the stone floor, on either side of the painting, jamming them into thin cracks. Between them was the square of cold earth, the spot he thought of as the temple's altar. He placed the hare carcass there, nailing the third candle in the soil, next to the animal. When he lifted his gaze to the image, he was taken aback. He thought that the face had somehow changed, in an infinitesimal degree - it seemed a bit more robust, a bit more scarlet, as if a hint of life had been breathed upon it. Probably just a trick of the candlelight, he mused, but also an inauguration sign for the temple.

He unveiled another prayer, a story he carried with him since his youth, the tale of a girl who cheated death by use of saintly bones.

He returned after two evenings, drenched in cold rain. The hare had rotted, had almost shriveled with an unnatural haste. The change in the face of the painting was unquestionable - the color had become a tone healthier and there seemed to be a bit of flesh now, between skin and bones, as if some nourishment had flowed into the face. Mirroring the unnatural amelioration, the plants inside the temple had grown, the green of their leaves more lustrous. He crossed himself and stood in awe, before placing another offering of flesh upon the earth. Then he uttered the tale of Paraskeva, the blind female saint that had once been wandering the village nights, her rosary full of the eyes of ungodly burials.



His visits to the ruins became more frequent. Kufjam craved to nurse his companion back to life, to health, to fill his body with nourishment. Each time, he brought a new kill: a long-haired ram, a pair of ferrets, rock partridges, hares and mallards - the land was bountiful in spring. He piled the offerings on the cold earth, upon the stone floor, among the blooming plants; deer and goats and glimmering serpents, side by side with hellebore, blackthorn and vervain. Day by day the temple scents ripened, touching on the putrescence of decaying flowers and the miasma of dogged blood. Each time he visited, he found the face in the painting more robust, his church enriched with spiny plants, with roots of stalwart, otherworldly aspect.

Kufjam also longed to fill the spirit of his companion with what he knew of sanctity: the fears of his elders, the lore of wood and broken moon, of vengeful dead and the black earth. On each visit he prayed, offering stories of his ancestors, the village saints who still loomed in the dreams of the people and the land.

After a month, the face had grown bloated, plump, stifling the silver frame; standing before the portrait, his lithe frame dwarfed by the huge putrescent piles of rotten meat and vegetation that covered the temple grounds, Kufjam admired his work. He had nursed the man back to health, he had exalted him to panegyric sainthood.

There was only one more thing to offer, one more prayer to tell - a tale not of the land, but of himself and of the man that stood painted before him, the man whose eyes were still closed, despite the long hours Kufjam had spent gazing at the rubric face, willing the flaccid, droopy eyelids open.

He knelt, his right hand trembling with zeal and exultation. Once again his mind flew back to the time of his imprisonment.

Kufjam remembered little of the dark period between the death of his fellow prisoner and his own release. It had been a time of feverish hunger, his thoughts a jumbled skein, death's pursuit relentless. During that time, a tale from his childhood kept coming back, coiling around his tongue - the story about a starving man who had entered the church one night, to eat the dead flesh from the bones of a saint, for, as his grandmother had said, a saint is no more a man, but more akin to god or beast, both of whom we can partake of.

Mad with hunger, Kufjam had sworn to himself that what he partook of was the flesh of a saint still unknown, a man whose sainthood loomed in the future.

His liberators had been terrified when they had burst into the cell. Kufjam was barely alive, a scrawny thing. His nameless companion was a gnarled husk, his right arm a mutilated, mangled mess.



As he had partaken, so he would give back.

At the end of his narration, his last prayer and confession, Kufjam drove the blade fast, decisively, through his right wrist. His hand fell with a thud on the cold earth, amidst a scarlet shower. The man in the portrait, his saint of flesh, was gorging on the spectacle; his countenance vibrating as tears of pain obscured Kufjam's eyesight. He heard the heavy eyelids open slowly, as unseen hands moved, clenched. As he plunged into darkness, the last thing he saw were the phantoms of his grandmother and aunt, the women that had entwined his existence with terror, moving beside him, the whole land mirrored in their eyes.

The two old women, dressed as midwives, came stooping out of the temple, supporting the maimed man between them. They had bandaged the stump of his right arm with star-embroidered linen, staunching the blood flaw. They left him resting on one of the cisterns - when morning came he would be able to slowly retrace his steps back towards the village.

They re-entered the temple and sealed its openings with rags they had woven during the past month, patchworks of earth and night, of eyes of saints and pagan hands.

They emerged after nine nights, cradling a plump newborn in their hands. The candle-lit village was waiting for them, woeful faces gazing at the newborn crescent moon.

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+MOUNTABRAXASPRESS+
+DEATHMEDITATION+
+THEPASTISALIVE+
+SECRETEUROPE+
+PAGANFEARS+
+BUCHAREST+
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